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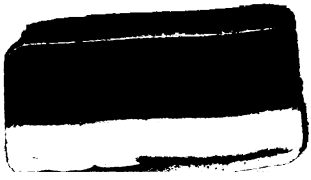

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NARRATIVE OF A JOURNEY

FROM

OXFORD TO SKIBBEREEN

DURING THE YEAR

OF THE

IRISH FAMINE.

BY

LORD DUFFERIN AND THE HON. G. F. BOYLE.

The proceeds of this Work to be sent to Skibbereen.

OXFORD,
JOHN HENRY PARKER.
1847.

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BAXTER, PRINTER, OXFORD.

PREFACE.

THIS Letter was written for the satisfaction of our own immediate friends and relations.

It is merely an account of what was seen and heard by two Gentlemen during a stay of twenty-four hours in a small town in the south of Ireland, at a fearfully interesting period. There will be found but few original observations, no censures, no suggestions, our only object being to give an accurate narrative.

Our names have been attached to the publication in hopes that they will be a sufficient guarantee for the truth of every thing related from "*personal*" observation. For almost every other assertion our authorities have been given.

CH. CH. *March* 1, 1847.

Oxford, March 1, 1847.

DEAR ———

WE have just returned from a visit to Ireland, whither we had gone in order to ascertain with our own eyes the truth of the reports daily publishing of the misery existing there. We have found every thing but too true; the accounts are not exaggerated—they cannot be exaggerated—nothing more frightful can be conceived. The scenes we have witnessed during our short stay at Skibbereen, equal any thing that has been recorded by history, or could be conceived by the imagination. Famine, typhus fever, dysentery, and a disease hitherto unknown, are sweeping away the whole population. The poor are not the only sufferers: fever is spreading to every class, and even the rich are becoming involved in the same destruction.

A detailed account of our expedition will probably afford you some satisfaction. We left Oxford on Friday evening, and reached Dublin late on Saturday night. Our time being limited, we had originally determined to go no farther than to some of the counties near the capital; but upon

mentioning our intention to an Irish friend, we were advised to proceed at once to Skibbereen, in the county of Cork, which was reported to be the very nucleus of famine and disease. Finding, however, that the Cork coach did not start till eleven o'clock on Monday, we thought it would be as well to run down early in the morning to a village about 45 miles distant from Dublin, where the coach would overtake us later in the day. The name of this village was Athy*. Upon our arrival there, we proceeded through the principal streets, and learning that a Soup kitchen had been recently established, we determined to visit it. Here we ascertained that the population of Athy has been divided into districts, to the poor of which tickets are issued, entitling them to two meals of Soup in the week. Above a thousand poor persons mainly look to this kitchen for support. Had we stopped at Athy, one would have brought back to England sorrowful intelligence enough, but not so bad as is usually represented in the newspapers. There were misery and hunger it is true, some deaths too had occurred, but still the village seemed brisk and lively, more distressed than famished. Perhaps the tenfold deeper misery which succeeded, has thrown a more cheerful aspect over this spot. By the time we had finished our enquiries and visited the different districts, the coach had arrived; and

* We hoped by this means to have an opportunity of learning the state of things in the less afflicted districts.

at two o'clock we were crossing the bridge out of Athy. It was six on Tuesday morning before we reached Cork; nothing very particular had occurred during the journey; we had passed several places where the roads were very much cut up, and gaunt, sickly men were languidly hammering stones by the way-side; these were the public works. At the end of every stage, the coach was surrounded by crowds of wretched creatures begging for something to eat, wan little faces thrusting themselves in at the window, praying "the kind gentleman just for one ha'penny to buy a penn'orth of bread."

We had not a moment to stop in Cork, for the Bantry Mail calling at Skibbereen started directly after the arrival of the Dublin coach. The only stranger in the coach was a Roman Catholic Priest, from whom we learnt many particulars of the state and prospects of the country. He fully corroborated all that we had previously heard, adding that he scarcely saw how the population could survive the next three months, unless the most effective measures were taken for their relief. He spoke very favourably of the patience and fortitude of many of the sufferers, and expressed his belief, that in this part of Ireland there is little chance of any outbreak, so long as the famine is confined to the lower ranks; that they are likely to suffer in patience. There was not wanting now and then the strongest confirmation of what he

had advanced, for we were constantly passing carts of meal and other provisions, attended even in these most destitute parts by a single man or boy. This is strongly contrasted with the state of other districts, in which the protection of the military or police is necessary, an instance of which we witnessed in returning through the county of Tipperary. In some parts of the country in which the distress is less keenly experienced, outrages are of far more frequent occurrence. Our conversation turned on the efforts of England in behalf of Ireland; he assured us they are most gratefully acknowledged; "that in many places, whatever may have been the former feeling of the people toward England, it is now very different." As he continued his account, the general aspect of the country became a sad comment to his evidence, for the fields on either side lay barren and uncultivated, the roads frequently interrupted by public works, the horses more wretched at every change, in the towns and villages through which we passed, the proportion of hovels still increased, while occasionally a new-made deal coffin standing up on end against the side of a house plainly indicated that we were rapidly approaching the head quarters of the Irish Famine. At Clonakilty, a small town about twenty miles from Skibbereen, a Government vessel had that morning arrived with provisions. After this the scenery became even still more wild and

desolate, the road wound through barren bleak mountains, no vestiges of labour or cultivation, while occasionally pools of stagnant bog water stretched out on either side the way. Soon, however, the cottages became more frequent, clustering together in greater numbers, and at length the coach drove into the ill-fated village which we had come such a distance to see. Skibbereen was till this year a "*comparatively*" flourishing place; the shops were good, and the tradespeople very respectable; but now its wealth, trade, and prosperity, are completely prostrated. Almost the first thing we saw on entering the town were nine or ten deal coffins, of which before we had occasionally observed single specimens, ranged on end against the side of a house, just turned off from the maker's hands. Round the inn door were crowded numbers of the most wretched beings one had ever beheld, not so much clamouring for alms, as looking on in listless inactivity. As soon as we had seen our luggage safely bestowed, we set off for the residence of Mr. Townsend, the clergyman of the place. By this time it was three o'clock, and a drizzling rain which had begun to fall made every thing look still more dismal. It was with some difficulty we made our way through the dense crowd which loitered in the streets, principally composed of women and children. Nothing seemed doing, there was no stir and bustle of business, and the

shop-keepers from lack of customers stood idle at their doors. On enquiring for Mr. Townsend, we were told he was engaged at the Relief Committee; but presently meeting him on his return, we accompanied him to the Parsonage. On our way we introduced ourselves, and explained the object of our visit, begging of him to give us an account of how matters stood in his parish. To our enquiries he replied, that nothing could be worse; that the whole population was being destroyed; that the typhus fever had broken out, that two of his maid-servants had died from it; that from the frequency of deaths and the necessities of the dying, it was found impossible any longer to perform the accustomed rites of the Church, and that even the providing of coffins became a matter of difficulty.

Having arrived at his house, he begged us to step in for a few minutes. In the drawing-room we found a lady working at a table, with a quantity of linen on the floor beside her; this was Mrs. Townsend, who during the absence of her husband was employed at home in preparing shrouds for the dead. In the quiet of his house we could more attentively listen to particulars. We learnt, that the population of the parish is about 20,000; that the proportion of deaths had risen from 3 to upwards of 100; that the Union was crammed with far greater numbers than it was ever intended to contain; that generally there were three and four in each bed, a man recovering

lying between two others in the height of raging fever; and that even still they were compelled to suffer multitudes to lie on the damp mud floor of their own cottages, the only alleviation being, that the frequency of deaths made continual room for new inmates. Some had even died in this uncared-for condition, and their dead bodies had lain putrifying in the midst of the sick remnant of their families, none strong enough to remove them, until the rats and decay made it difficult to recognise that they had been human beings. His expectations for the future were equally desponding. August must come before the soil itself could contribute any thing to the support of its inhabitants; but even then little could be expected, for seed-time was rapidly passing away, and in all directions the land lay unsown and untilled. The cause of this is quite apparent; the small farmer, upon the annihilation of his only support, unable to cultivate his patch of ground for want of immediate subsistence, is forced to resort to the public works, where he can at least earn 10d. a day[b]; while many of the larger farmers, the men who make the exports which astonish every one, and by the sale of their corn have alone flourished in the midst of the general calamity, are hoarding up their money in the Savings' Bank, withholding his due from the impoverished landlord, in

[b] Half a stone of meal costs 1s. 8d. and is barely sufficient to afford a daily meal to a moderate family.

order that they may on the first opportunity escape from the famine-stricken island to the unblighted harvests of America.

Mr. Townsend then proposed to take us the round of his parish; and having quitted the Parsonage, our conversation naturally continued on the same subjects. He deeply lamented the demoralization among the inhabitants, and the loss in some of the spirit of independence, for the Relief Committee had occasionally detected persons on the public works whose real circumstances did not entitle them to this means of support. But if he was able to instance cases of this kind, he could bring forward some, on the other hand, in which respectable tradesmen had been literally reduced to be dependent upon public charity [c]. He evinced his anxiety to meet such cases in a distinct manner, by mentioning an attempt of his to induce the Relief Committee to grant the sale of a small quantity of Indian corn on favourable terms to a poor tradesman, rather than to suffer him to be immediately treated like the other destitute persons.

Conversing on these subjects, we reached a most miserable portion of the town; the houses were mere hovels, dark and dismal in the inside, damp and filthy to the most offensive degree. So

[c] One man having been refused relief at a private house on account of his respectable appearance, was found dead near the door a quarter of an hour afterwards.

universal and virulent was the fever, that we were forced to choose among several houses to discover one or more which it would be safe to enter. At length, Mr. Townsend singled out one. We stood on the threshhold and looked in; the darkness of the interior was such, that we were scarcely able to distinguish objects; the walls were bare, the floor of mud, and not a vestige of furniture. The poor have pawned nearly every article of furniture which they possess, in order to obtain food; the number of tickets at the brokers is almost incredible; many have thus parted with the means of future subsistence, as in the case of some fishermen, who have pawned their boats and nets, and so deprived themselves of the power of deriving benefit from the fish, which abound along the coast. We entered another at no great distance: over a few peat embers a woman was crouching, drawing her only solace from their scanty warmth; she was suffering from diarrhœa: there seemed scarcely a single article of furniture or crockery in any part of the hut. The woman answered the enquiries of Mr. Townsend in a weak and desponding voice; and from what we could gather, there appeared to be several other human beings in different corners of the hovel, but in the darkness we were totally unable to distinguish them.

This case is cited, not as an instance of extreme destitution, but as a proof of the miserable condition to which some, who were once in flourishing

circumstances, have been reduced; for the woman, we were told, was the wife of a respectable tradesman, who but two months before was carrying on a thriving business; and the same reverse of fortune had been experienced by others likewise. Mr. Townsend assured us, that in each of the surrounding huts we should witness the same or similar scenes, aggravated, perhaps, by the prevailing epidemic.

On quitting the cottage, one could not help thinking of its cheerless aspect even by day, and could form some picture of what it would be by night; how slowly and drearily the hours would pass away; how little the comfort, as far as this world is concerned, in looking to the future; how small the ground of hope that their existence could be protracted through the five months yet to come, before the soil can yield them subsistence, even if they have strength and energy to cultivate it! In addition to this, the ravages of typhus among their immediate friends and neighbours, the dismal visits of the funeral cart, the call to the inmates to bring forth their dead, serving daily to realize to them the sad results, would leave but little ground of hope, that if they escaped the famine, they would avoid the fever!

Our next visit was to the churchyard; it was the burying place to an ancient abbey, the ruins of which still remained mouldering away in the midst of the surrounding tombs. There was nothing

picturesque or beautiful about it, no ivy, no columns, no ornamented arch; loose walls and bare stones were the only vestiges of the ancient structure. It was a very large grave-yard, and most of the graves had evidently long since been made; but in one corner there was about an acre of uneven and freshly-turned earth. This was the portion allotted to the late victims of famine and disease; by these graves, no service had been performed, no friends had stood, no priest had spoken words of hope, and of future consolation in a glorious eternity! The bodies had been daily thrown in, many without a coffin, one over another, the uppermost only hidden from the light of day by a bare three inches of earth, the survivors not even knowing the spot where those most dear to them lay sleeping. In one place, the ground had been hollowed out to the depth of two feet, where several coffins were piled up in layers one above another, with but a sprinkling of earth between them, the ends protruding into that part of the shallow trench which still remained unfilled. When Mr. Townsend remonstrated with two men we found in another part of the churchyard, for leaving their work thus incomplete, they excused themselves on the ground, that six more bodies were expected in the course of the evening; mentioning at the same time, that they had buried six on the previous morning from the workhouse, and four more in the evening of the same day,

and that some days no less than eleven bodies were brought to be thus interred. Upon returning, we passed over a portion of the yard where no mounds indicated that bodies had been interred beneath. "Take your spades, and dig there," said Mr. Townsend to the two men. "I dare not, Sir, I dare not," said one of them. "What are you afraid of?" said Mr. Townsend, as he took the spade into his own hands, and began by shovelling away a little of the earth. He had not proceeded far, before a portion of a white shroud appearing above the mould stopped his further progress.

The most fearful anticipations are entertained of a pestilence breaking out, as soon as the hot weather shall set in, from the effluvia that must necessarily arise from bodies decomposing so near the surface[d], and a pestilence once begun, who shall say how far its ravages may extend! It is found impossible to induce the people to dig to any depth, so feeble and languid are they become. At first a man was placed in the churchyard to see the bodies properly interred; but this precaution was found worse than useless, for the poor wretches used then to bury their dead in the garden behind their cottages, scraping a hole for them during the night. All these cases are the more shocking, from the fact, that this people are very particular in

[d] The authorities have taken measures to remedy these abuses *for the future*, by preparing a deep pit for the reception of the dead.

paying due honour to the dead, and conducting the burial ceremonies with all the magnificence their poverty will admit.

On quitting the churchyard, we returned towards the town; at a spot where the road diverged into two different directions, we came to a small cottage, built as usual of mud and loose stones, and raised a little above the level of the road; there was only one window, and that almost blocked up, the door was shut, and the hut had every appearance of being deserted. At this moment, the funeral cart with its attendant came towards us; it stopped opposite the cottage; a deal coffin of a large size, in order to suit the dimensions of all persons, lay jolting at the top. With some difficulty the man backed the vehicle up the ascent. In the mean time, the clergyman beckoned us to one side, and we prepared for one of those scenes of which we had often heard, but never expected to witness. We learnt that the coffin was for a woman who lay dead in that house, and that four others of the same family lay sick of the fever, unable even to assist in removing the body of their relation. The man with the cart called to another, the same whom we had seen in the churchyard, bidding him assist in carrying out the corpse; and upon his refusal, began to curse and swear in the most awful manner, unchecked by the very presence of death, and the almost visible manifestations of the judg-

ment of God. At last, however, the man consenting, both disappeared within the shadow of the door way. Presently they returned, bearing between them the dead body, over which a scanty tattered yellow rag had just been thrown, not sufficient however to cover the whole length of the figure, or to prevent one's seeing the livid lifeless arms as they hung down swinging and knocking against the ground. They hastily flung it into the shell, the cart drove off, and the remains were hurriedly consigned to the earth without a coffin, and without the offices of religion! Who was most to be pitied? the Pastor, thus compelled to witness the destruction of his flock; the men, who most probably enacted but a rehearsal of their own burying; the fever-stricken wretches, who were left helpless and hopeless in the darkness of their cottage; or the human soul, just borne by death far beyond the dominion of famine and disease? Such is an instance of the scenes hourly occurring in the western provinces of Ireland! Surely no sacrifice would be too great by which they could be alleviated. If ever a prudential foresight for future competence is to be sacrificed to the urgent necessities of our fellow-creatures, this is the occasion. Depend upon it, none will hereafter suffer from a present simple and trustful generosity.

On our way home, the Clergyman gave us new instances of misery; each story possessed some hor-

rible feature which rendered it more monstrous than the preceding; witnessing how moral depravity is the invariable concomitant of physical want. "Do you see that man?" said he; and he pointed to a tall thin figure, whose white face was rendered still more ghastly by the black hair with which it was overgrown. "Yes," said we, as our eyes rested on the wretched creature, cowering and crouching against a door; "what of him?" "It is only a week ago since that man dragged the dead body of his father by the heels across the road, through all the mud and mire, in order that he might fling him into the coffin!" After this we separated, he to attend some fever patients, and we to the temporary refuge of the hotel, promising however to pay him another visit in the evening.

At dinner there were three other gentlemen beside ourselves. A good deal of the conversation was occupied in enquiries after different persons suffering from typhus; for, as we said before, the upper classes, and especially those charitable persons who superintended the distribution of soup, &c. were beginning to succumb to its attacks; and on that very evening, the principal gentleman in the town, a clever man too, and one who had distinguished himself at the University, lay delirious with the fever.

Our tea at the Parsonage was sad and gloomy enough. Desirous of diverting the poor man's attention from the thoughts which were constantly preying on his mind, we tried a little general con-

versation; but though partially succeeding, we too often involuntarily returned to the pressing topics of the place. He told us, he was obliged to keep his outer gate* locked, to prevent the influx of applicants whom he could not relieve, and who might bring with them the infection. He distributes daily large supplies of bread, much of which is given to those found by the road side, unable from debility to proceed, or apply themselves to their work. One poor woman, some time after the rest of the applicants had dispersed, was found lying on the ground in a pool of water before the windows, for when they have reached a certain stage of hunger, food is often of no avail, and even fatal. After bidding good bye to the poor Clergyman and his wife, we returned to the inn for the night. On our way, we called on Dr. Donovan, the zealous and indefatigable Physician of the place; he is night and day employed in ministering to the poor, and although he has visited every scene of death, and incurred every risk of infection, that merciful protection has been hitherto extended to him, which so often shields the priest and the physician in the execution of their duties to the sick. He corroborated all Mr. Townsend's statements, and added an anecdote from his own knowledge. At some distance from Skibbereen there was a cottage, in which lay a man and his

* We have since learnt, that the servant stationed at the gate for this purpose has himself caught the fever.

wife both sick of the fever; the woman died, and the husband had just sufficient strength to crawl out and bury the body in his garden. During the night he distinctly heard dogs scratching and howling over what he but too well knew was the lately made grave; he sent out his little girl to drive them away, but they only bit at her, and frightened her back into the cottage. The following day one of the neighbours brought back the head of the unfortunate woman, saying, "that his dog had brought it home!"

Immediately before breakfast the next morning, we set off for the dwelling of the Roman Catholic priest. Nothing could be more civil than our reception, and he most obligingly answered all our enquiries. It was the same story over and over again. "Frequently," said he, "poor destitute creatures flocking in from the country, have knocked at my door at eleven o'clock at night, beseeching for a little shelter; and I not able to let them in, but obliged to send them away into the streets; and even during the day time I am forced to employ a man to keep off the infected crowd from my visitors, and from those with whom I have to transact business."

The coach was to pass through Skibbereen at ten o'clock, but upon its arrival we found it full; however, we determined to hurry on by any conveyance which could be procured, as we had seen quite enough to satisfy us, and a further stay would

have been both painful and unnecessary. After a delay of three or four hours, we succeeded in hiring an outside jaunting car, to which an extra horse was attached. While this was being prepared, we sent out for an immense basket-full of loaves, intending to distribute them to the occasional starving beings we were sure to meet with by the way; but some of the people of the town had learnt our intention, and collected in a great crowd under the window to the number of 100 or 200, mostly women. It was a frightful sight to see those pale eager faces staring up at us, uttering all manner of entreaties. Of course there was no hope of carrying off the bread, indeed it would have been cruel to have made the attempt; the only question was, how to divide it. At first we sent it down to the door, but the rush was so great, that that scheme became impracticable; and it only remained, to throw it out of the window. One can never forget what followed; the fighting, the screaming, the swaying to and fro of the human mass, as it rushed in the direction of some morsel, the entreaties and gestures by which each one sought to attract our attention to herself, and above all the insatiable expression of the crowd as it remained unsatisfied and undiminished at the exhaustion of our loaves—for what were they among so many! By two o'clock they announced the car to be ready, and it was with some difficulty that we got to our places amidst the crush and noise. At last, however, we were fairly

off, the horses careering about in all directions, and the strongest of the multitude running by our side, still asking for bread. We soon, however, cleared the outskirts of the town; and as we rattled along on a hard dry road, for the wind had changed, and the sun shone brightly, we wondered whether we should ever return to the village of Skibbereen, and what legislation and what influences could soonest make Ireland happy and cheerful, and its poor people industrious and independent. We got to Cork at half-past twelve o'clock that night, and thence next night to Dublin, and so by Holyhead to Oxford, where we arrived on Saturday afternoon, having been exactly eight days absent.

We remain, dear ———

Your affectionate friends,

DUFFERIN AND CLANEBOYE.

GEORGE FREDERICK BOYLE.